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ABSTRACT

The borders that separate and connect different cultures often come into sharpest relief when the focus is on themes and motifs found in the literature or the visual arts of several lands. With the Internet, students can discover such points of intercultural contact for themselves, crossing borders that can lead them to a broader perspective on the common vision human cultures share. The learning objectives of this lesson plan are: to expand awareness of themes and motifs common to many cultures; to encourage critical insight into the ways cultural context influences creative expression; to analyze and interpret the significance of themes and motifs within distinct cultures; and to organize and present a comparative statement of findings. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-11), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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Common Visions, Common Voices

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Lesson Plans

SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

The borders that separate and connect different cultures often come into sharpest relief when we focus on themes and motifs found in the literature or the visual arts of several lands. With the Internet, students can discover such points of intercultural contact for themselves, crossing borders that can lead them to a broader perspective on the common vision human cultures share.

Learning Objectives

To expand awareness of themes and motifs common to many cultures; to encourage critical insight into the ways cultural context influences creative expression; to analyze and interpret the significance of themes and motifs within distinct cultures; to organize and present a comparative statement of findings.

Lesson Plan

1 Begin by reinforcing the concept of literary and artistic themes and motifs. Ask your students for examples from American or European literature that illustrate some familiar patterns in fiction, such as the journey, metamorphosis, or a series of heroic trials. Ask likewise for some persistent motifs in the visual arts, such as the representation of landscape and of the female and male forms. Explain that they will be using the Internet to explore the arts of non-European cultures for characteristic patterns and

Literature: World
Art: Anthropology
Art: Folklore
History: U.S.: Native American
History: U.S.: The West
History: World: Africa
History: World: Ancient
History: World: Asia
History: World: Latin America

9-11

analysis of visual resources
critical thinking
collaborative work
electronic citation
Internet research

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motifs.

Focus initially on the visual arts by having students examine four artworks that portray a male and female couple:

- A **terracotta figurine** from the Mayan culture (c. 700-900) showing an old man embracing a young woman. (In the "**African, Oceanic, and New World Cultures**" Collection of the Detroit Institute of Art, scroll down the page and click on "Precolumbian Art." Then scroll down this page and under the category "Life and Death," click on the image of the "Embracing Couple.")
- A Native American **feast bowl** (Cherokee or Iroquois, c. 1800) with its two handles carved in the shape of male and female heads. (Also in the "African, Oceanic, and New World Cultures" Collection of the Detroit Institute of Art.)
- A **wooden sculpture** from western Sudan showing a man with his arm around a woman. (Accessible through African Studies WWW; in the "Africa Web Links" directory choose "Arts and Architecture," then look for the "Art and Life in Africa Project" and choose the exhibit on "Marriage and Eligibility.")
- An Indian temple carving (c. 700) of a *mithuna* or loving couple. (Accessible through SARAI; in the "India Resources" directory choose "Art and Culture," then look for "World Art Treasures" and choose the exhibit on "India.")

2 Divide the class into small research teams and provide each with an opportunity to study the four artworks online. Have students first describe each piece in detail, noting characteristics of design and appearance, as well as similarities and differences among all four. Then have students use the Internet or library resources to research the culture that produced each artwork in order to determine its significance for the people who created it. Students might, for example, identify the two figures portrayed and explain what they symbolize or represent; describe the artwork's cultural setting or context and its function in community life; characterize the relationship between the two figures and analyze the relationship set up between the couple and those who interacted with the artwork in its original setting. Have students present their research in the form of a museum-style caption for each artwork.

3 When students have completed their research, have each group report its findings in a class discussion. Then ask students whether there are common threads of meaning connecting these four disparate examples of an artistic motif. Why

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer

do all four appeal to us, even before we understand their cultural significance? What meaning do they retain even outside their cultural context? Would they retain this meaning if shuffled among the cultures that produced them? What basic human emotions and experiences do they tap into? (You might explore also the degree to which we impose our sentiments on these artworks by setting them up as examples of a persistent artistic motif, and the degree to which we appropriate them to our own cultural purposes by treating them as aesthetic objects rather than as the instruments of religion and ritual they were intended to be.)

4 Following this class discussion, have each student write a short interpretative essay on the significance of the "couples" motif, drawing evidence both from these four artworks and from examples in the European tradition, such as images of Adam and Eve, or Grant Wood's *American Gothic,* or even the portraits of couples regularly published in the wedding announcement section of most newspapers.

5 Depending on your curriculum, you may wish to repeat or replace this lesson with one focusing on story motifs from several non-European cultures. Trickster stories can be revealing in this respect.

- You will find a selection of **Native American trickster stories** featuring Coyote at the NativeWeb "Resource Center;" in the "Arts and Humanities" directory select "Literature," then look under "Short Stories - Traditional."
- A collection of **Mayan trickster stories** featuring Rabbit can be found at the LANIC website; in the Subject Directory select "Literature," then choose "Indigenous People's Literature" and look under "Stories."
- Rabbit also stars in an **Ethiopian trickster story** accessible through the African Studies WWW website; in the "Resource List" select "K-12," then choose "Tales of Wonder" and look under "Africa."

6 Have students read these stories, online or in print out form, then divide the class into study groups to research the cultures and countries in which these folktales are told. In performing this research, students should be aware that these stories come to us through a still vibrant oral tradition, which means that while they reflect the heritage of their respective cultures, they can also reflect the outlook and concerns that mark these cultures today. Rather than place the trickster stories in a context of the remote and "primitive" past, students should aim in their research, and in their interpretation of the stories, to see them as representative of indigenous cultures that have adapted to new conditions today by preserving their cultural values. As part of their research, have students identify the values expressed in each group of stories - i.e., the character traits exhibited by the trickster and whether these traits are admired or ridiculed; what the stories imply about the responsibilities of an individual toward his or her community; what the stories imply about authority figures and their power within society.

7 After they have completed their research, have each study group lead a class discussion of one story, providing background on its cultural origins and eliciting comment on its distinctive treatment of the trickster motif. Conclude this

networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. (more)
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (more)

National Geography Standards

10. The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of earth's cultural mosaics (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
9. Global Connections (more)

National Standards for Arts Education

Visual Arts

4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures (more)

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. (more)
2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. (more)
4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own. (more)

View your state's standards

discussion by asking students for examples of the trickster in American culture - e.g., Tom Sawyer, Ramona Quimby, Lucy Ricardo, Bugs Bunny, etc. Have students offer reasons why this figure is so often found in children's literature? What happens when the trickster appears in the adult sphere of action (e.g., Falstaff)? To close the lesson, have each student write and deliver orally an original trickster story reflecting the values and concerns of his or her culture.

Extending the Lesson

Ask students to give two examples of other intercultural artistic motifs using the resources available at EDSITEment as well as traditional print resources in your school or at a local public library. Students might also visit art museums in your area or contact people in your community who are knowledgeable about non-European cultures, particularly those informed about current developments in these artistic traditions. Students who pursue a visual motif across cultural borders can produce a bulletin board or web page exhibit of the artworks they collect, along with a descriptive catalog that introduces the motif and explains its varied significance. Those who explore a literary motif can produce an anthology, again with an introduction explaining the motif's character and significance.

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